



In Light of God's Salvation...

THEOLOGICAL THEME: Our best efforts at obedience are bound to fail unless we have first experienced God's salvation through Jesus.

The nursery rhyme “Five Little Monkeys” is popular in households with little children. Perhaps you know it. “Five little monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his head. Mama called the doctor and the doctor said, ‘No more monkeys jumping on the bed!’”

While this little ditty teaches the principle of subtraction, it should also teach an important life lesson—learn from the mistakes of others. As we’ve seen in our study of the Old Testament Book of Joshua, the Israelites have had many opportunities to learn from the mistakes of their ancestors and peers. In this session, they are given the choice to learn from past mistakes or repeat them.



Voices from Church History

“May God help [us] to submit without delay [our] proud will in loving, child-like obedience to Himself.”¹

—D. L. Moody (1837-1899)



What are some actions that contradict what people say they believe?



Why is it important for Christians to act in ways that line up with what we say we believe?

Date of My Bible Study: _____

In this session, we will read the story of Israel’s choice to worship Yahweh as their God. Joshua, their leader, was near the end of his life. As he read the book of the law and gave Israel a choice (worship God or worship idols), he called the people to remember God’s faithfulness and live in light of His salvation. Like the Israelites, we too are called to live in light of God’s salvation by worshiping God in sincerity and truth, by putting away our idols, and by following Him in obedience.

1. Worship the Lord in sincerity and truth (Josh. 24:14).

After a long life of faithfulness in leading Israel (as Moses’ successor), Joshua called on the people to live in light of God’s salvation:

¹⁴ “Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

In his words to the Israelites, Joshua gave key instructions that got to the heart of worship—fear the Lord; worship, or serve, Him in sincerity and faithfulness; and get rid of the gods of your fathers. Joshua’s directives implored Israel to serve the God who had saved them. (The biblical understanding of servanthood has its foundation in people serving God in worship. The terms for “service” and “worship” are often interchangeable.²)



What would you say are characteristics of worship done “in sincerity and in faithfulness”?



What characteristics would be found in insincere, unfaithful worship?

Notice how Joshua addressed both positive and negative elements in serving the Lord. Positively, the Lord was to be served in sincerity, that is, without hypocrisy and in faithfulness. Negatively, the Lord was to be served by discarding their false gods, the idols the Israelites' ancestors had worshiped beyond the Euphrates River in the time of Abraham and the gods in Egypt. (Joshua may have been thinking about the spectacle of the children of Israel dancing around the golden calf, which had been made by Aaron, possibly resembling an Egyptian god.)

Though our experiences occur in a different era, God's standard of holiness remains steadfast. Fearing God still means standing in awe of Him. It is easy to imagine standing in awe in the presence of your favorite athlete, scholar, or movie star. But just think about it—we are *always* in the presence of God (Ps. 139:7-12) and should tremble at His displeasure.

For this reason, serving God, as Joshua instructed, must be done with integrity. The word for “sincerity” here is also used by David in Psalm 18:25, a psalm about God rescuing him from his enemies. Can you imagine David wholeheartedly thanking God for saving his life from Saul? In his song to the Lord, David said God repaid him (David, an upright man) with His uprightness. Joshua's use of this strong word was intended to lead the Israelites to serve God wholeheartedly and to fear the cost of half-hearted devotion.

Joshua also instructed the congregation to worship God in faithfulness. This is the opposite of pretending. Joshua's words were commands with a tinge of warning—be people of integrity. God knows our hearts and our inner thoughts.



What role does a sense of awe play in leading us to sincere and faithful worship of God?

Voices from the Church

“There are four great impelling motives that move men to action: Fear, Hope, Faith, and Love...Fear is first in order, first in force, first in fruit. Indeed, fear is ‘the beginning of wisdom.’ Scripture summarizes the chief cause of sin and crime: ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”³

—*The Prairie Overcomer*

2. Put away idols (Josh. 24:15-23).

¹⁵ And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶ Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. ¹⁸ And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹ And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” ²² Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” ²³ He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

The Israelites understood the implications of Joshua’s words as they listened to him that day. Like Moses did when giving his last words to the Israelites on the edge of the promised land, Joshua offered the Israelites a choice. If it seemed evil, or displeasing, for them to serve the Lord, then they could direct their allegiance to a false deity, one of the false gods their ancestors served beyond the Euphrates River, ones whom God had proved were impotent. Or they could choose to serve the gods of the Amorites in the promised land where they were dwelling, the gods who were shown to be nothing as God had already driven out the Amorites. The choice was theirs.

Joshua did not offer them the luxury of neutrality—they could not serve the one true God of Israel and false gods (see Matt. 6:24). And then, in one of the great acknowledgments of an individual’s undivided loyalty to God, Joshua affirmed that he and his house would serve the Lord. It was his way of saying, “Even if I and my family are the only ones in Israel who will serve the Lord, we will serve the Lord.”



Joshua committed himself and his family to serving the Lord. What are some ways that a family can cultivate the same kind of devotion to the Lord's service?

The people responded to Joshua with a congregational “Amen!” This was their verbal understanding that it would be ludicrous to forsake the Lord in order to serve false gods. This congregational commitment was based upon God’s involvement in their history. Their recounting of their history matched Joshua’s recalling of their history. They knew it was the Lord who worked wonders from Abraham’s time to Joshua’s time to keep His promise to Abraham (Gen. 12)—the promise that now had reached a level of fulfillment in their own time. The motivation for Israel to serve the Lord and proclaim Him as their God was God’s faithfulness to them.

But then Joshua made a surprising statement: “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God” (Josh. 24:19). Was this a statement of judgment? Did Joshua set them up just to tear them down? No. Joshua realistically looked beyond their passionate declaration. He knew that Israel had often forgotten the God who had rescued them. He knew their sinful tendencies and their past unfaithfulness.

Serving the Lord was a serious matter. It required more than an easy, verbal congregational resolution. Rejecting the Lord would bring serious consequences upon those who forsook Him to serve foreign gods. But in spite of Joshua’s objection, the Israelites remained steady and once again made an affirmative confession—“No, but we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:21).



Voices from the Church

“When we ask people what they want in church instead of giving them what they were created to long for, we play into the very idolatry that church was created to dismantle.”⁴

—James MacDonald

We can understand their decision. They knew the fear of crossing the Jordan and felt the ground tremble as the wall of Jericho tumbled down. They knew the awesomeness of God’s might displayed over and over as they possessed land they did not own. In light of God’s salvation, Joshua called the people to put away their idols and to set themselves as witnesses against themselves if they were to disobey.



How does Joshua’s frank and honest assessment of Israel’s inability to be faithful strike you?



In what way is our commitment to worship God in light of Christ’s salvation different than the Israelites’ commitment?

3. Commit to obedience as a sign of our salvation (Josh. 24:24-28).

²⁴ And the people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.”²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem. ²⁶ And Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. ²⁷ And Joshua said to all the people, “Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD that he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.”²⁸ So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance.

Joshua wanted the people to count the cost. He established a way to judge whether or not the Israelites were keeping the vow they made to the Lord—the statutes and rules from the Torah. These rules served as reminders of their obligation to live out their verbal confession. These rules provided the measure for their commitment to God.



What is the significance of Joshua erecting a physical stone to remind the people of their commitment?



What actions in our homes and churches help remind us of our calling to live in light of God's salvation?

Joshua made a covenant with the people. Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. He took a large stone and personified it—as if it had ears to hear the resolutions voiced by the Israelites. The stone would serve as a witness, a visible prosecuting attorney against Israel if they did not live out their confession of being faithful to God.

The story of Joshua and his leadership reminds us of the responsibility we have to disciple the next generation. Parents have the responsibility of directing their children by training them in the way they should go (Prov. 22:6). We submit to the training of God through various circumstances and seek to live in obedience, trusting Him to empower us to follow in His ways. God calls us to put away our idols and display for the world a new way of living, made possible only through Christ's salvation.

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

73. Justification and Works

Justification is not the result of human effort or good works but through faith in the righteousness of Christ. Although good works do not lead to justification, justification leads to good works in the life of a believer (Eph. 2:10). Faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17). While good works do not establish justification, they do verify a genuine faith and make our justification evident to others.



Why is it important that we see our obedience in light of God's salvation and not as a way of earning God's salvation?

Conclusion

Like Joshua, believers must count the cost, considering the annals of time and the record of history to remember God’s plan for good and not evil to those who believe (Jer. 29:11). Joshua’s faithfulness was rewarded and he was called “the servant of the LORD” at the end of his life (Josh. 24:29).

Also like Joshua, we are to have a realistic understanding of our ability (or inability!) to obey God perfectly. The beautiful difference between our situation and Israel’s is that we have an even greater leader than Joshua—Jesus Christ, God’s chosen servant who brings us not into the earthly promised land but into our eternal inheritance. The children of Israel were unable to keep their vows (as we will soon see in Judges 2:10), but because we have the Holy Spirit living inside of us and guiding us, we are empowered to live in light of God’s salvation and to point the world around us to that light.



Voices from Church History

“It costs something to be a true Christian. Let that never be forgotten. To be a mere nominal Christian, and go to church, is cheap and easy work. But to hear Christ’s voice, follow Christ, believe in Christ, and confess Christ, requires much self-denial. It will cost us our sins, and our self-righteousness, and our ease, and our worldliness. All—all must be given up. We must fight an enemy who comes against us with twenty thousand followers. We must build a tower in troublous times. Our Lord Jesus Christ would have us thoroughly understand this. He bids us ‘count the cost.’”⁵

—J. C. Ryle (1816-1900)

CHRIST CONNECTION: Joshua was God’s chosen servant to bring the Israelites into the promised land. His story points forward to Jesus Christ, God’s chosen servant who will bring God’s people to their eternal inheritance.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to put away our idols and display for the world a new way of living, made possible only through Christ's salvation.

1. How does God's salvation through Jesus Christ lead us to be in awe of Him?

2. What are idols in your life you need to put away so you can focus your attention on Christ and His mission?

3. What can we as a church/group do together to be obedient to God in light of our salvation in Jesus Christ?
